

Rabbis and Rabbinic Literature



Sam Cohen

Learning Goals

- Who were the rabbis?
- What is rabbinic literature?

How the use of rabbi has changed over time

- Title of authority/ mode of address
- Used to refer to important men similar to the way people nowadays use “sir”
- Used to designate the master of a slave or a teacher
- In the New Testament
 - Matthew uses rabbi to mean both sir and teacher

Use of Rabbi in Rabbinic Literature

- Became used as a special designation for a teacher
- Because Jesus was referred to as rabbi and he is so heavily associated with teaching, the NT shows traces of the shift from rabbi meaning “sir” to “teacher”

What is Rabbinic Literature?

- Rabbinic literature is the writings by and about Jewish teachers which usually focused on cultural or legal questions
- It sought to fill in the gaps in knowledge left by other Jewish writings
- Examples: Mishnah, Babylonian Talmud and Jerusalem Talmud

The Mishnah

- Part of the Jewish oral law
- Created to fill in holes left by the Torah of Moses
- Divided into six sedarim
 - Zera'im
 - Mo'ed
 - Našim
 - Neziqin
 - Qodasim
 - Toharot
- Commentary of the Mishnah is found in the Tosefta, Bavli, and Yerushalmi

The Tosefta

- Means addition or supplement
- Includes oral sayings that are not part of the Mishnah
- Organized in the same way as the Mishnah

The Talmudim

Jerusalem Talmud (Yerushalmi)

- Commentary on the Mishnah minus Qodasim and Toharot

Babylonian Talmud (Bavli)

- Commentary on the Mishnah minus Zera'im and Toharot

Both contain commentary on legal traditions (Halakah) and lore (Aggadah)

Influential Figures in Rabbinic Literature

- Akiva
 - Leading rabbinic sage of antiquity
 - Most influential figure in developing halakah after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE
 - Advocated for constructing halakah through midrashic interpretation
 - The Mishnah is based largely off of Akiva and his student's compilations
- Hillel and Shammai
 - The last pair of scholars
 - Hillel was the presiding officer of legal council
 - Shammai was the head of the judicial court
 - They each represent a tendency in halakic development

Issues with Rabbinic Literature

- Rabbinic literature is difficult to understand without detailed knowledge of cultural and theological presumptions (ex. Biblical laws)
- Rabbinic literature must be read in its historical, social, and religious context to fully understand it and its relevance

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